DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 470 398 SO 034 128

AUTHOR Jones, Kimberly; Sturman, Shelley; Perlin Ruth R.; Moore, Barabara S.

TITLE Degas at the Races. Teaching Program.
INSTITUTION National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 1998-00-00
NOTE 34p.; Supported by the First Union Corporation.
AVAILABLE FROM National Gallery of Art, 2000B South Club Drive, Landover, MD 20785. Tel: 202-737-4215; e-mail: info@nga.gov; Web site: http://www.nga.gov/ .
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom - Teacher (052)
EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Art Activities; *Art History; *Artists; Biographies; Creative Activities; *Freehand Drawing; *Painting (Visual Arts); *Sculpture; Secondary Education; Teaching Guides
IDENTIFIERS *Degas (Edgar); France (Paris)

ABSTRACT

This teaching guide discusses Edgar Germain Hilaire Degas (1834-1917), his paintings, and his sculpture. The guide focuses on his paintings of daily activities at the horse racetrack in Paris (France). The unit has a concise biography of Degas. It is divided into two parts: Part 1: "Paintings and Drawings" (Kimberly Jones); and Part 2: "Sculpture" (Shelley Sturman). Part 1 shows pictures of 10 Degas paintings and discusses the circumstances of their production. Part 2 uses the same strategy for nine Degas sculptures. The guide provides classroom activities for visual arts, advertising, journalism, and the depiction of French life during the time that Degas painted and sculpted. (BT)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 470 398

Degas at the Races. Teaching Program.

Hillaire Germain

National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
First Union Corporation, Charlotte, NC.

SO 034 128

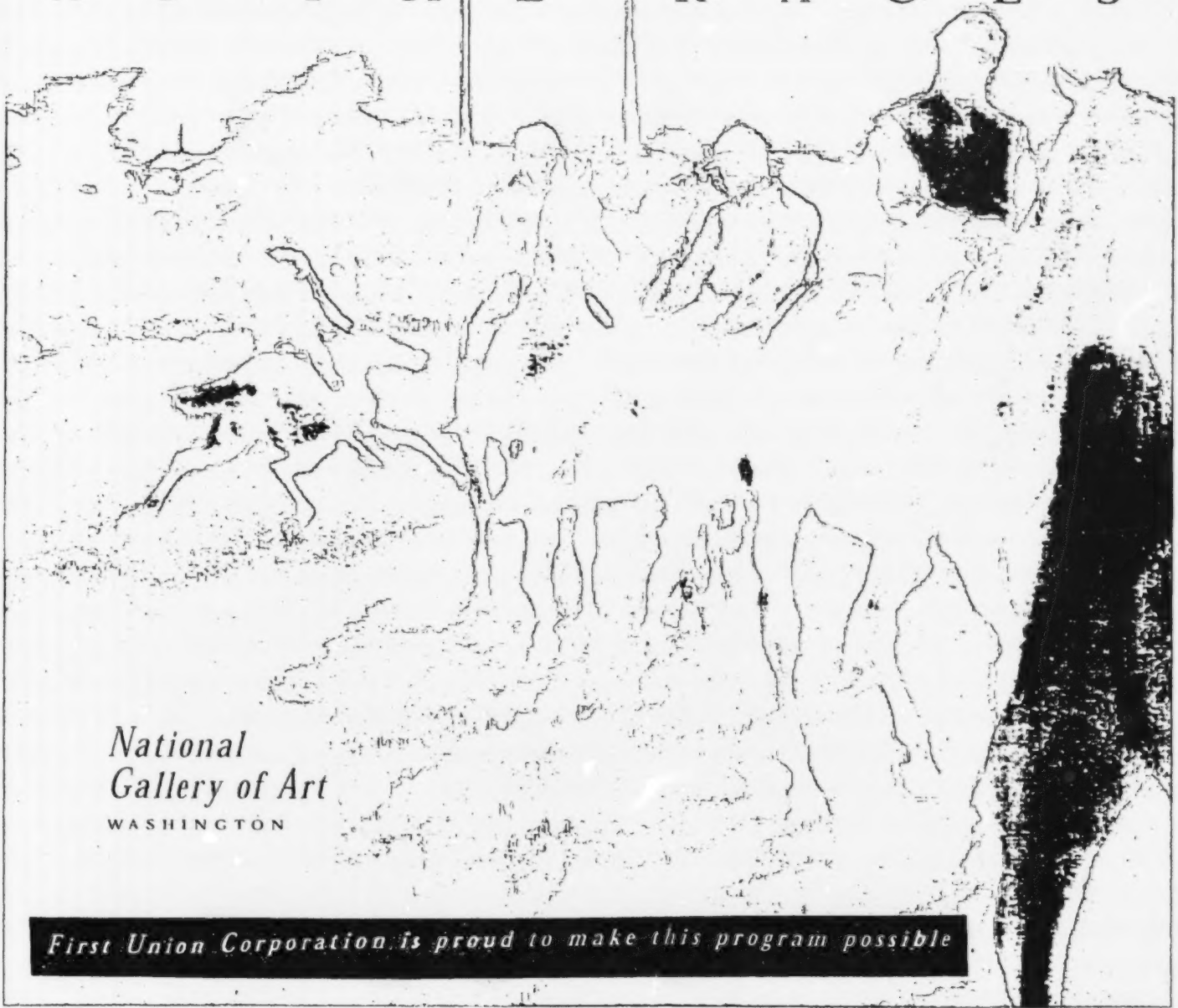
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

T E A C H I N G • P R O G R A M

Degas

A T T H E R A C E S



National Gallery of Art
WASHINGTON

First Union Corporation is proud to make this program possible

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

HILAIRE GERMAIN

COMMENTARIES

Part I

PAINTINGS AND DRAWINGS

Kimberly Jones
Assistant Curator, French Paintings
National Gallery of Art

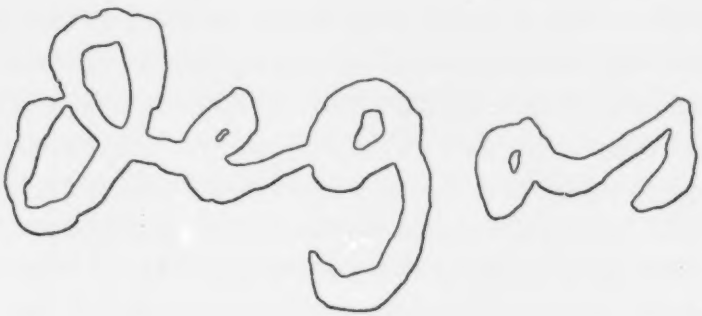
Part II

SCULPTURE

Shelley Sturman
Conservator and Head,
Department of Object Conservation
National Gallery of Art

COVER:

The Parade (Racehorses before the Stands) (detail), 1866–1872, *essence* on paper, mounted on canvas, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, Bequest of the comte Isaac de Camondo, 1911

EDGAR  1834-1917

Born in 1834 to a wealthy Parisian family, Edgar Degas could also claim Italian heritage. His grandfather had established himself in Naples, and many of his relatives lived in and around that city. A branch of the family also resided in New Orleans. Thus, the Degas family extended across three countries: France, Italy, and America. As a young man Degas traveled in Italy, where he discovered the Old Masters in visits to churches and museums, such as the Uffizi in Florence. Back in France, he studied art at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Degas' instructor had been a pupil of the great neoclassical artist and supreme draftsman Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, who was Degas' idol. Degas met Ingres once; the master told the young student, "Draw lines, young man. Many lines." Degas followed Ingres' advice and also became a dedicated student of contemporary life and a passionate experimenter with artistic techniques and strategies. Among his most notable subjects were the urban life of Paris and the amusements of the French—from hat-shop clerks and laundresses at work, to the ballet, cabaret, and horse racing. ◇ In light of his interest in contemporary subjects, it is not surprising that Degas was drawn to newly popular equestrian sports. His fascination

with the horse was an important element of his work in virtually every medium—paintings, pastels, drawings, prints, and wax. Not only was horse racing a modern form of entertainment, which, like the Parisian ballet, was a superb source for the study of movement and athletic grace, but it was also, like dance, marked by a controlled tension and discipline that captivated the artist. ◇ Degas may be credited with originating new means of pictorial expression. He expanded the artistic ideas of generations of French artists and brought an unprecedented psychological dimension to the subjects he chose. His greatest gift was his ability to use visual strategies—unusual perspective, expressive color, and cropped compositions—to capture inner realities. ◇ As Degas himself acknowledged, the sophistication of his works derived from study and experimentation. Unlike many of the impressionists, who worked in a spontaneous manner in front of their subjects, Degas developed his final compositions from sketches, which he later worked and reworked in his studio. He sketched constantly, usually concentrating not on an entire composition but on figures or fragments of figures, and on capturing movement and gesture. Degas amassed hundreds of such sketches in notebooks and often used studies he had made decades earlier in his trial-and-error process of combining figures and motifs. There is no question that, once incorporated in his finished works, these fragments have a natural eloquence that reveals Degas' powerful understanding of pictorial issues and his keen observation of character and milieu.

SELF-PORTRAIT
PROBABLY
1857. ETCHING
National Gallery of Art, Washington, Rosenwald Collection

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Part I

Paintings and Drawings

S L I D E 1

Battle of San Romano (after Uccello)
1859, graphite on white paper
Private collection

Degas' drawing of *The Battle of San Romano* is a copy after a painting by Uccello, a Renaissance artist renowned for his explorations of foreshortening. The painting is a large, dramatic battle scene in the early Renaissance style—full of color, gilding, and elaborate detail. Degas had seen the work at the Uffizi in Florence.

In translating the painting into a drawing, Degas took a personal approach. He didn't copy Uccello detail for detail, and what he includes and excludes is telling. Little background is described; it is the horses that are of foremost interest. They are clearly outlined, clearly delineated. Great variety is seen in their poses: some are viewed from the side, others from the rear. In the right corner one horse kicks up its hind legs, in the foreground, another has fallen.

In drawings like this one, we can see Degas beginning to develop his visual vocabulary. Although such early studies after the Old Masters might seem to be simply the academic exercises of a young man, they are never rote. Degas was developing the approaches that he would use in later work, digesting an array of sources. This friezelike composition, common in early Renaissance painting, reappears in Degas' later paintings in a far more sophisticated way.

Another important early source for Degas was the Parthenon frieze, which, following the training prescribed by academic tradition, he had drawn many times. Although it is doubtful that Degas had seen the fragments of the

Parthenon sculpture (the Elgin marbles) in London, he would have known them from plaster casts, which were common in schools of art. Degas focused on the frieze's procession of horses and riders, expressing his fascination with the horse. Degas' renditions of these stately, elegant creatures are full of power and intensity.

S L I D E 2

ALEXANDER AND BUCEPHALUS
1859–1861
OIL ON CANVAS
National Gallery of Art, Washington, Bequest of Lore Heinemann in memory of her husband, Dr. Rudolf J. Heinemann

For artists of Degas' era, history painting was revered as the most honorable and prestigious type of painting. It was emphasized at the École des Beaux-Arts and was exhibited most prominently at the Salon. Although Degas is now regarded chiefly as a master of impressionism, he followed this tradition in his works of the 1850s and 1860s.

Alexander and Bucephalus may very well be Degas' first history painting. It is one of three versions of the subject—two painted in oil and one in watercolor. This is a large picture—forty-five by thirty-five inches—a size appropriate for history paintings, which were expected to be physically ambitious and grand, as well as intellectual and erudite.

Degas depicts a scene from ancient history, the story of the young Alexander the Great and Bucephalus, a horse no one could tame. Bucephalus actually means "ox head," an apt name because of the animal's stubbornness. Alexander's father had warned him away from the horse, reputed to be dangerous, but Alexander had watched the trainers as they tried to tame Bucephalus and noticed that the horse seemed to shy away from his shadow. The clever youth, who would later conquer most of the known world, turned the animal's head so it could no longer see its shadow, after which it became docile. And so Alexander tamed Bucephalus. It's a wonderful story, demonstrating

the intelligence of the boy and symbolizing his ability to tame the world in the future. That Degas chose this moment is particularly interesting, for in some ways it can be construed as an analogy to the artist's taming and gaining control over his art.

Degas kept this painting his entire life; it was in his studio when he died. It is a difficult painting to date precisely because it has been heavily reworked, something typical of Degas the perfectionist. While the horse is finely painted, the foreground is filled with big, bold brushstrokes. There are also differences in the treatment of Alexander's drapery and the loosely painted costume of the figure at the right dressed in a similar pink robe.

S L I D E 3

SCENE FROM THE STEEPLECHASE: THE FALLEN JOCKEY
1866; REWORKED, 1880–1881 AND C. 1897
OIL ON CANVAS
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon, Upperville, Virginia

Degas' ambitious but problematic history paintings of the late 1850s and early 1860s included works such as *Sémiramis Building Babylon* (Musée d'Orsay, Paris) and *The Young Spartans* (National Gallery, London). *A Scene of War in the Middle Ages (The Misfortunes of the City of Orléans)* (Musée d'Orsay, Paris) was accepted for the Salon of 1865 but did not receive much attention. This focus on history painting is an indication of Degas' ambition as well as his adherence to the traditional means of winning official commendation and commissions by exhibiting at the Salon.

Degas' next step was to exhibit *Scene from the Steeplechase*, or *Une Scène de Steeplechase*, the following year. The title is generic, that is, it does not describe a specific event. In part, this may be Degas' response to the art of a slightly older contemporary, Édouard Manet, who in 1864 had exhibited *Episode from a Bullfight*, another painting with a generic title that depicted a tragic scene from modern life.

What is Degas trying to do with this painting? It is one of the largest he ever made: more than seven feet by five feet. Perhaps he learned the importance of presenting a large, noticeable painting from his experience with the Salon the previous year. But this painting is also ambitious in another critical respect. Now, for the first time, he creates an image of modern life for the Salon.

Viewers would have been familiar with this type of scene, as horse racing had become increasingly popular in France, particularly during the 1860s. A number of prestigious races had been established, most notably the

Grand Prix de Paris in 1863. With a purse of 100,000 francs, it was one of the best endowed races in all of Europe.

The dangerous steeplechase was another matter. Unlike horse racing on the flats, a steeplechase is a risky obstacle course. The French version is based on the English and Irish steeplechase, which is an informal race run in the countryside. A group of men on horseback would choose a steeple—a visible, fixed goal—and race toward it, riding over everything—bridges, fences, hedges, and streams—between the starting point and the end. People fell, frequently injuring or even

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

killing themselves. In France "le steeplechase" was a somewhat more organized event, with a specific distance and course. It was very much a gentleman's race, designed for aristocrats, not for professional jockeys, and was a way for men to demonstrate their *sangfroid*, their ability to keep a cool head in dangerous circumstances. Certain places specialized in steeplechases, including Le-Pin, a racetrack in Normandy near the estate of the Valpinçons, friends whom Degas frequently visited.

In the early 1860s there were a few paintings at the Salon showing the steeplechase, but no one had painted anything like this. Instead of a modest genre painting of "a gentleman's race," it is epic, ambitious, and full of high drama. Degas has taken an ordinary event—the steeplechase—and turned it into a history painting. It's *Alexander and Bucephalus*, but in reverse. In this battle between man and horse—man and nature—man has lost. A fallen jockey lies in the foreground while the race continues.

When the painting was exhibited in 1866, it received only a few reviews. Afterwards, Degas took it back into his studio, and it wasn't seen again until around 1880. At that time, Mary Cassatt, a good friend of the artist and herself a member of the impressionist group, talked to Degas about buying racing paintings for her brother, Alexander, who was a skilled rider. She was specifically interested in *Scene from the Steeplechase*, but Degas was hesitant to part with the painting. It had been in his studio for fourteen years and he still had a vision in mind of how to perfect it. He began to rework the painting, but even in 1881 he was not ready to sell it to the Cassatt family.

Degas apparently reworked *Scene from the Steeplechase* a second time around 1897. When you look at the painting, evidence of his different campaigns are apparent. The face of the fallen jockey, who is usually identified as Achille Degas, the artist's younger brother, is finely drawn, with delicate features. But if you compare the face with the big, bold brushstrokes used to define the riders at the left, you can see that the technique has changed. In the sky, the patches of blue peeking through are traces of the original sky. Degas repainted most of it using bright pinks and dynamic colors.

There is also evidence of the initial composition. The upraised tail of a horse can be seen as a line in the sky above the trees (the second from the right). That line echoes the brown tail in the painting as it is today. If you look between the front legs of the forwardmost horse, you can see a shadow, which is actually the original leg. An undefined round, brown area at the right was at one time a fallen horse, probably left there from the original painting.

In the final work, Degas uses black outlining extensively. This is unusual in his early work, but not uncommon in his very late work. He often used outlining to emphasize figures in his paintings from the 1890s and early 1900s. Thus, this work encompasses almost four decades of Degas' career from the beginning in 1866 through the late work of the 1890s.

S L I D E 4

Degas' numerous studies for *Scene from the Steeplechase: The Fallen Jockey* are evidence of how important this painting was to him. They record the various stages in the evolution of the painting, in which both technique and medium change.

This drawing of the fallen jockey shows most of the body. When you look at the drawings and the painting, a question comes to mind: is he fallen, or is he dead? In the painting's original state, he looks stunned, but in the later version his head is so close to the horse's leg that there is a sense of impending danger, the threat of death, which strengthens the tension and drama in the picture.

The technique of the drawing is beautiful. Degas combined not only graphite and charcoal, but pastel for a hint of color. A bit of the pink silk from the painting reoccurs, and delicate touches of white chalk create the highlights. It is very much a drawing in process, and this is visible particularly in the figure's right leg (on the left-hand side of the drawing), where the various lines suggest that Degas may be working out the position of the limb.

FALLEN JOCKEY (STUDY FOR SCENE FROM THE STEEPLECHASE: THE FALLEN JOCKEY)
c.1866
CHARCOAL AND WHITE CHALK ON PAPER
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon, Upperville, Virginia

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

S L I D E 5

CHILDREN AND PONIES IN A PARK
1867–1868
OIL ON CANVAS
From the Collection of Joan Whitney Payson

Paintings like this one, *Children and Ponies in a Park*, reveal more about Degas than his more public works. Always a very private artist, Degas guarded his independence fiercely. He was loyal to friends such as the Valpinçon family, with whom he was very close. He vacationed with them and spent quite a bit of time at their estate in Normandy, at Ménil-Hubert. While there, Degas probably saw a lot of horse races. The estate is not very far from the great stud farm at Le-Pin, which also had a racetrack that specialized in the steeplechase. Members of this family appear in some of Degas' more intimate works, many of them depictions of family life.

Although the figures cannot be identified with complete certainty, they are probably the Valpinçon children. Degas' image of them is innocent, sweet. They are in a park, perhaps on the estate grounds. The children are at play. One girl rides a pony, leaping over grass in a whimsical imitation of the steeplechase. Another child rides off in a different direction, and a third girl tries to encourage her burro to stand up, without much success.

This moment, full of charm and humor, is something that Degas may have witnessed. The painting was never meant for public exhibition, but rather to be enjoyed by Degas and his intimates.

S L I D E 6

Degas' work is dominated by certain subjects: the racehorse, the ballerina, the nude, the laundress. He worked with these themes almost obsessively, searching for perfection. Degas is known by the American public primarily for his ballet scenes, such as this one, *The Dance Lesson*. In approach and in composition, they are similar to his depictions of horses at the races, for in both subjects the artist saw the qualities of nervous tension, an elegant and sometimes awkward grace, and the tightly restrained and controlled energy of physical performance.

When painting ballerinas and racehorses, Degas rarely showed them in action, preferring to depict them at rehearsal—"before the start" or "before the race," as many of these images are called. This painting also depicts preparation for a performance. Degas liked the informality of that kind of scene. Instead of the public persona of the dancer, the prima ballerina carefully posed, he depicts the real person in informal circumstances. Here the dancer on the far left, wrapped in a red shawl, is resting with her head on her hand, perhaps taking a quick nap. Another dancer sits with her tutu fanned over the back of a chair; not a graceful pose, but very much part of the dancer's everyday life. Degas depicts horses in the same way, in the anticipatory moments when jockeys try to gain control of their mounts before the start of the race.

Authenticity is what interested Degas. He actually said that he wanted to "paint life through a keyhole." He liked to capture reality, intimate and informal. He loved the dance, but the performance was for everyone. This was a way of "peeking behind the curtain."

Works such as this show the innovation of Degas. The strong horizontal composition recalls his early fascination with classical friezes and bas-relief. Here, too, the composition is meant to be read from left to right, like a narrative.

THE DANCE LESSON
1879
OIL ON CANVAS
National Gallery of Art, Washington, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon

We can also detect the influence of Japanese prints in the way Degas crops his images. For instance, only half of the dancer is shown at the far right. Her bright orange bow and her back are visible, but not her front. The tutu of the dancer on the far left has been cut off. The view of her seems accidental, like a "snapshot," immediate and spontaneous. The influence of the Japanese print is also felt in the way that the ground shifts upward. The composition tilts slightly, so that not only does it read from left to right, but also from bottom left to upper right. To our twentieth-century eyes, this isn't shocking. But in the nineteenth century, this was a daring shift of spatial references.

In this painting, Degas has created a perfect counterpoise of the figure in the lower left with the figures on the upper right. Like a seesaw, they are held in balance by the figures in the center. Although these compositional strategies create an informal, casual impression, the image is very carefully composed. Everything Degas created was very carefully considered and orchestrated; the genius is in its apparent effortlessness.

S L I D E 7

AT THE RACES: BEFORE THE START
C. 1885–1892
OIL ON CANVAS
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon

At the Races: Before the Start contains the same carefully arranged images as in *The Dance Lesson*. The horizontal composition is similar to that painting, but it is even more friezelike. Again, there is a sense of informality, with some horses turning toward the viewer, others into the picture. In the center is a jockey trying to control a tense, nervous horse. Versions of this horse are repeated over and over again; it is one of Degas' favorite motifs.

Instead of reading this painting from left to right, you read from right to left, moving on a diagonal from the large, prominent horses to smaller and smaller forms on the left. The composition is very flat, almost abstract, with little detail. Within this predominantly planar composition, Degas suggests distance by making the forms smaller as if they recede in space. Figures are arrayed across the picture plane in the middle ground, and yet, because the horses become smaller and smaller, there is a sense of depth. Here, too, is evidence of Degas' knowledge of Japanese prints, in which compositions are often dependent on sequences of

planes. For example, the green grass creates a foreground plane, the hills form another plane, and behind them, the sky is still another plane.

Degas also uses basic color principles to amplify the sense of spatial recession: bright colors come forward, as in the vivid hues of the jockeys in the foreground; darker, cooler colors recede into the background. This may seem elementary, but in Degas' hands, it is highly sophisticated, with colors and intensities balanced as carefully as the forms.

S L I D E 8

STUDIO INTERIOR WITH "THE STEEPLECHASE"
C. 1881
OIL ON CANVAS, MOUNTED ON BOARD
The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, Sam Spiegel Collection

This is an unusual image: a document that the artist created of a moment in time. It shows the original painting of *Scene from the Steeplechase: The Fallen Jockey* as it appeared in 1866, as if displayed in the artist's own studio. For a long time, this painting was thought to be a study for *Scene from the Steeplechase.* Recently, the real subject of the picture was deciphered.

It's a very difficult painting to read. First you see, slightly off center, the image of a steeplechase. Then you begin to notice other things: in the upper right-hand corner is a block of white, probably another painting. At the lower right is another rectangle, yet another painting, and right next to it, overlapping the white rectangle, is an area of blue that looks as if it might be a figure, as if there were a spectator in the studio looking at the paintings.

Degas produced a number of paintings in which the act of looking and the role of the spectator are explored. Degas himself was an avid collector, not only of his own art, but also of works by other artists, including Ingres, Delacroix, and Goya. Degas spoke about creating his own museum, prompting speculation as to whether he would include his own works. It has been suggested that this picture might have been Degas' "mock up" of how *Scene from the Steeplechase* might appear in his private museum. So here once again, Degas provides the viewer a glimpse of life through the keyhole, a peek into his own studio.

This painting is also an important document for *Scene from the Steeplechase,* because it shows its appearance before Degas reworked it. Scientific studies—X-ray and infrared photographs—have confirmed that this is how the painting looks underneath the surface. Study it carefully, and you will see the horse with the little tail sticking up in the air that we noticed

SLIDE 8

in the final reworked picture (slide 3). If you recall the undefined brown area at the right of the final painting, you can see that it was once a horse, with even a bit of a saddle. Notice, too, that the horse is much farther away from the fallen jockey than the one in the later version. This picture also lacks the trees of the other painting, and the sky is predominantly blue—bright pink is not present in this first version. This image was never meant for public viewing, but was, perhaps, a private document to remind Degas of what *Scene from the Steeplechase* looked like before he retouched it.

Degas suffered from increasingly poor eyesight as he became older. Fundamentally interested in the basic formal qualities of art—line, shape, or color—his work became more abstract as he aged. Degas was more interested in interactions of color and form than in details. His weakening eyesight and inability to see fine details may have played a role, but perhaps it was a conscious move away from depictions of reality toward more aesthetic and increasingly abstract works.

SLIDE 9

Degas was intrigued with the visual image as a two-dimensional object. He did not always try to create the illusion of three dimensions. In his later work he explored the interaction between flatness and surface. This is especially true in Degas' pastels, such as *Three Jockeys*, a wonderful blend of his love of line and color.

After about 1900, Degas produced virtually no paintings. Pastel, which Degas had begun to explore in the 1870s, became his medium of choice. (Of course, he still made drawings and sculpture, which will be discussed later.) The pastels contain a sense of Degas' presence, of his hand moving across the paper, creating a rich, lush, dense surface. In *Three Jockeys* there is a distinct graphic quality in the white pastel that zigzags across the foreground. Notice the vibrant colors—pinks and greens and darker greens and blues and purples. The sky recalls the audacious hues of the sky in *Scene from the Steeplechase*, even in the curious halo effects—here yellow, in the painting, pink.

Yet Degas has not become fully abstract, and in some places he is reworking motifs from his own art. If we recall the horse in the center of the earlier painting *At the Races: Before the Start* (slide 7), the same pose—with the jockey trying to gain control—reappears at the far right. The jockey in the foreground who is riding on the balking horse is found in a number of Degas' drawings and paintings. Degas is again using his favorite motifs and beloved themes, but with greater emphasis on surface design. The horse has become abstract and lacking in detail, yet there is no confusion as to its identity. For all their simplification, they're not static, because the energy of the horse and the energy of the hand of the artist can be sensed throughout. This pastel is one of the last works Degas made of the horse.

THREE JOCKEYS
C. 1900
PASTEL ON TRACING PAPER, MOUNTED ON BOARD
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Partial and Promised Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Douglas Dillon, 1992

SLIDE 10

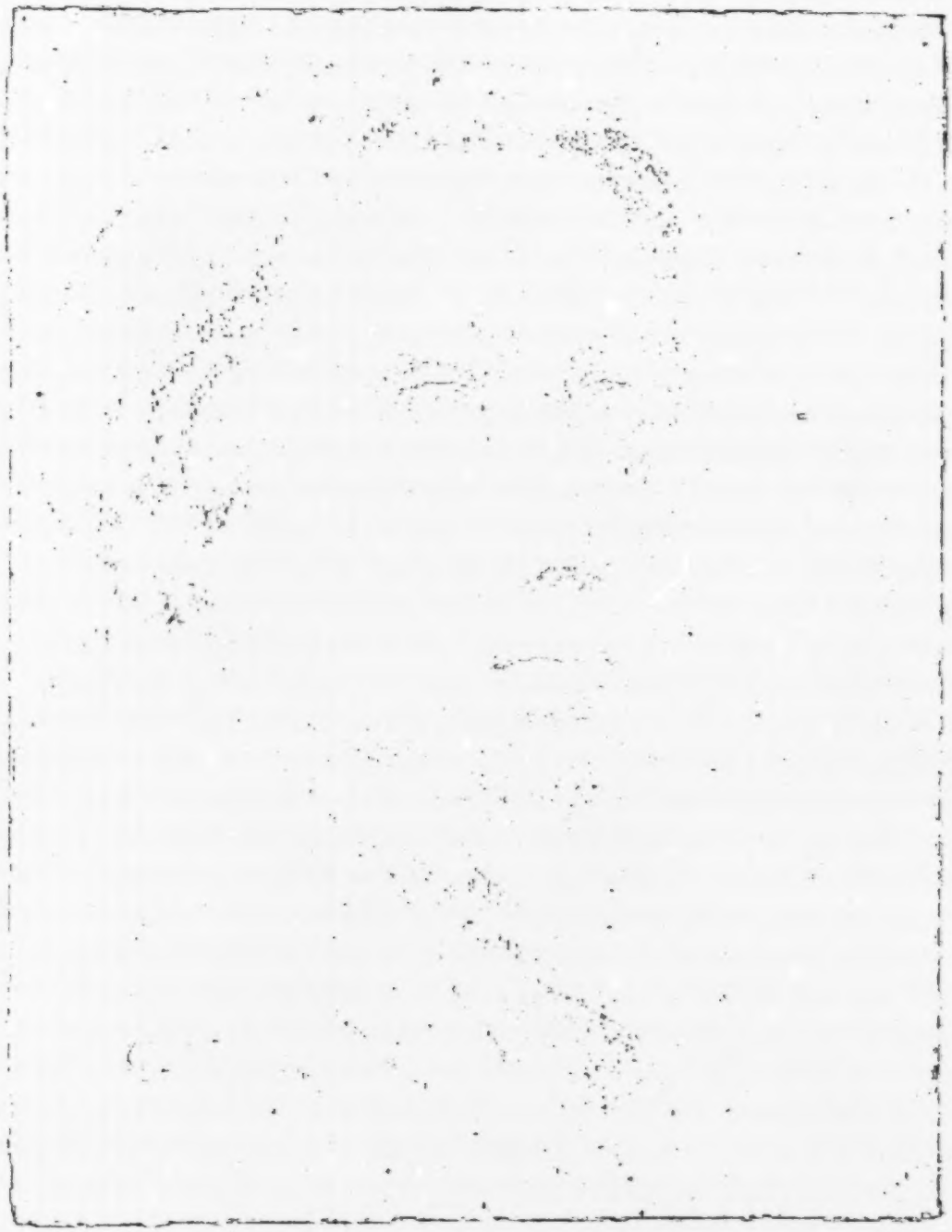
JOCKEY
c. 1900
WASHED PASTEL, BROWN WASH, AND TRANSFERRED PASTEL ON PAPER

National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Mrs. Jane C. Carey as an addition to the Addie Burr Clark Memorial Collection

This is a simple image—a solitary jockey on horseback, with very little color, only brown and blue. But the figure is imbued with tremendous energy, and the presence of the artist's hand is palpable.

This work is especially interesting because it represents a horse in motion. Multiple lines echo the legs, creating an impression like that of motion photographs. Degas was interested in and influenced by the innovative stop-action photography of animals taken by Eadweard Muybridge in the 1880s (see slide 18). Horse and rider are overlaid by smudged halos that seem to vibrate, imparting a sense of movement. Still, line is essential—Ingres hasn't been forgotten.

This work is a "counterproof," a transfer of a drawing in pastel or charcoal from one sheet to a facing sheet. Degas liked to experiment with various media and graphic techniques. In addition to paintings and pastels, he explored sculpture and photography. He produced etchings, monotypes, and counterproofs. In looking at Degas' art it is always interesting to see the way different media interact. He would create a counterproof or a monotype print, for example, and then heighten it with pastel. In the unconstrained way he used a variety of media, Degas revealed his view that everything he made was unique, an object in and of itself. But in his use and reuse he also clearly saw each object as potential material for future use. In his art, everything builds and draws upon something else. This is one of the things that makes Degas' work so resonant: everything fits together beautifully, in its own way.



SLIDE 11

Part II

SCULPTURE

S L I D E 11

SELF-PORTRAIT
C. 1857
RED CHALK
ON LAID PAPER
National Gallery of Art, Washington, Woodner Family Collection

Although Degas is best known as a painter and draftsman, he was also a sculptor from almost the beginning of his career. When friends came to visit Degas in the three-story Paris studio where he lived and worked, they were as likely to find him modeling wax or clay as they were to find him at the easel. Few outside of his immediate circle knew of this work, for Degas did not, with one exception, exhibit his sculpture. Only after his death in 1917, when his dealer Joseph Durand-Ruel inventoried his last studio, were more than 150 pieces of sculpture found, a number of them unfinished, falling apart, or badly broken up. It was the posthumous bronze casting of those of his original wax and clay pieces, determined to be in sufficient condition to be reproduced, that brought public attention to Degas as a sculptor. Degas himself was not drawn to making bronzes. The medium's permanence was ill-suited to the way he worked, which involved constant changing and revision. The casting of Degas' waxes was undertaken through his heirs after his death. Degas' brother and his sister's children contracted with the Hébrard Foundry, which, beginning in 1919, molded and cast twenty-two sets (not all of which were complete) of seventy-four works, including a full set each for the Degas heirs and the foundry. Albino Palazzolo, the master founder, took care to preserve Degas' original sculpture; unfortunately, four waxes were lost in the casting and they are known today only in their bronze versions. You can imagine the interest of the public in the bronzes of Degas' works, known almost exclusively by close associates before that. When these bronzes were disseminated around the world, some museums bought entire sets. Other institutions and private collectors bought individual pieces. It was not until the 1950s, in the aftermath of World War II, that Degas' original wax and clay sculpture—from which secondary waxes were made for the lost-wax bronze casting process—were discovered in the basement of the Hébrard Foundry.

Today, the National Gallery has the largest public collection of Degas' original waxes, seventeen in the permanent collection and thirty-one as a promised gift. We have been able to study the materials, the armature, and the finishing and handling of these pieces. Through X-radiographs (X-rays), we have learned that Degas' sculpture has increasingly complex wire armatures (interior structures), and combines wax and clay with experimental "filler" materials such as wine-bottle and mustard-jar corks, long nails, a door-hinge pin, and even a salt-shaker top. By comparing the sculpture to stylistic changes in Degas' paintings and pastels, we are developing a chronology for the sculpture, which Degas did not date or sign.

S L I D E 12

HORSE AT TROUGH
EARLY 1860S
RED WAX
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Collection of Mr. And Mrs. Paul Mellon

Horse at Trough is considered one of Degas' earliest works of horse sculpture, made in the 1860s. Its brown wax with red highlights, its transparency and sheen, and its light rippling and reflecting off of Degas' surface modeling of the wax create a strong impression of the horse's flesh or skin.

Degas' materials and techniques were critical to the look of his wax sculpture. Degas' "wax" was actually a composite of materials, for he worked with modeling clay and plastilene (a clay with oil in it so it doesn't harden); he then covered the surface with wax, which is transparent, easily modeled, and keeps clay from drying out. Sometimes Degas added starch to his wax to give it more bulk. He also added pigment to the honey-colored beeswax.

Study the horse's mane to see Degas' hand modeling. The hairs have been individually delineated with various modeling tools. The horse's mouth is articulated, as are the indentations for the eyes and nostrils. This attention to detail is characteristic of academic work, although animal sculptors (called *animaliers*) working at the same time produced pieces so detailed that they approximate sculptural photographs.

In his later works Degas progresses from a labor-intensive, structured manner to a more fluid, loose sculptural style. You will see that change, both in his handling and finishing of materials.

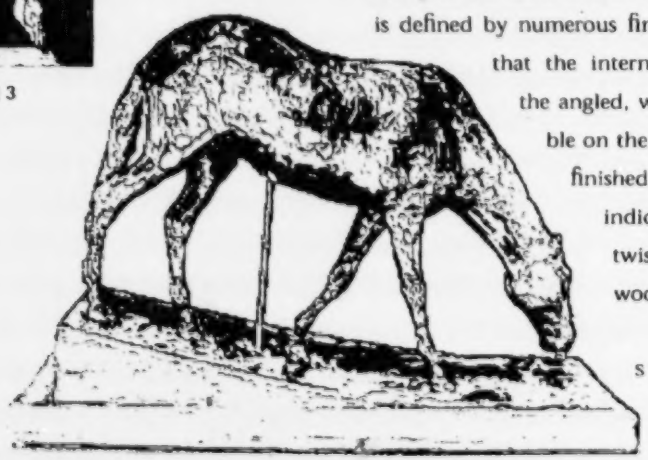
S L I D E 13

X-RADIOGRAPH IMAGE OF HORSE AT TROUGH

X-rays reveal what is hidden inside sculpture, just as they pass through a body and show a skeleton as white. Degas' metal armature stops the X-rays' penetration, causing it to show up as white. The wax and clay portions of the figure appear gray.

SLIDE 13

The X-radiograph of *Horse at Trough* shows that Degas' armature is like a detailed sketch or drawing, with an intricate interior structure. Wrapping and twisting wire, Degas formed the basic skeleton of backbone, neck, head, ribs, legs, and tail—and manipulated them into the position he wanted. Look closely at the chest, and you can see how the barrel of the rib cage is defined by numerous fine wires. Also note that the internal construction of the angled, wooden base is visible on the X-radiograph. The finished sculpture gives no indication that there are twisted wires, blocks of wood, and nails inside.



SLIDE 12

SLIDE 14

HORSE WITH JOCKEY; HORSE GALLOPING, TURNING THE HEAD TO THE RIGHT, THE FEET NOT TOUCHING THE GROUND
MID 1870S
DARK BROWN AND REDDISH-BROWN WAX AND GREEN CLAY
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon, Upperville, Virginia

Horse with Jockey has now been dated to the 1870s, at least a decade later than *Horse at Trough*. A photograph from 1917–1918, showing all four hooves off the ground, documents Degas' introduction of movement in his sculpture. In this slide, however, note that the back right hoof touches the sculpture's base, a change that probably occurred when the piece was being prepared for casting.

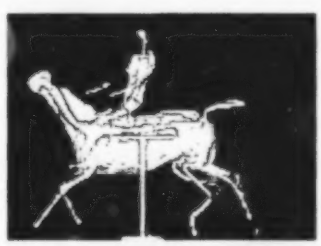
The outer coating of this horse is a red-brown tinted wax. But look under the neck and along the horse's flanks: the green underlayer peeping through is Degas' modeling clay mixture. Degas may have intended to reveal the clay, or perhaps chunks of the sculpture's wax surface fell off. The simultaneous visibility of internal green-tinted clay with some red-brown wax over it suggests that Degas revised the piece or intended it to look "unfinished." In either case, it is a beautiful window into the materials and original colors of the work. When reproduced in bronze, however, some of the modeled texture and color nuances are not conveyed.

SLIDE 15

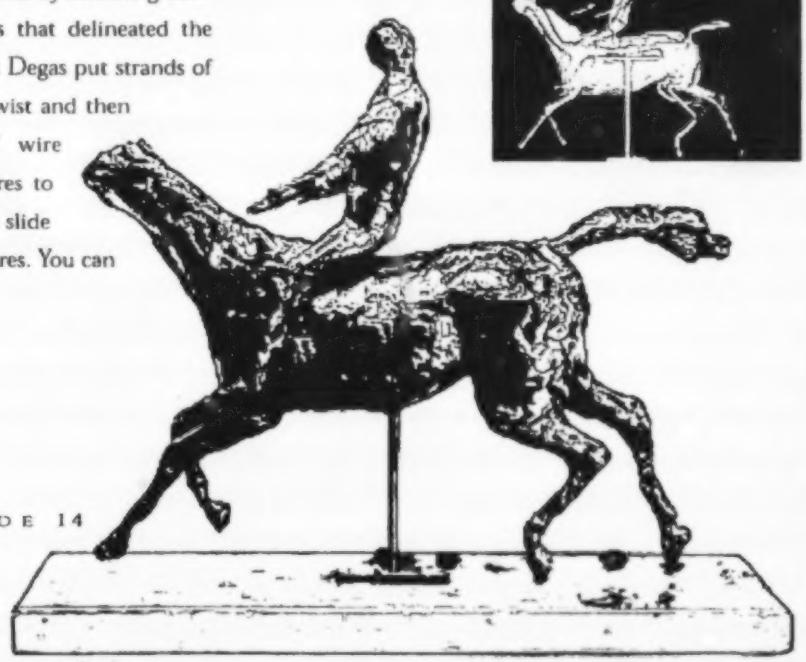
X-RADIOGRAPH IMAGE OF HORSE WITH JOCKEY; HORSE GALLOPING, TURNING THE HEAD TO THE RIGHT, THE FEET NOT TOUCHING THE GROUND

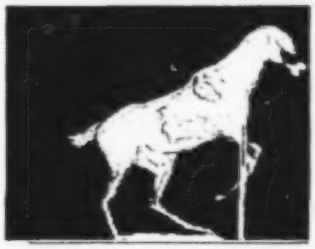
This X-ray shows a sculpture interior very different from that of *Horse at Trough*. Degas' later armature is an ingenious design that incorporated movable joints for his horses. Whereas in *Horse at Trough* Degas had fashioned the inner structure of knee joints by attaching bundled wire to rigid pieces that delineated the upper and lower leg, here Degas put strands of wire together with one twist and then coiled little pieces of wire around these braided wires to form joints that he could slide up and down the fixed wires. You can also see a bed-spring shape at the four hooves and across the back bone. These coils have been observed in only one other sculpture by Degas.

SLIDE 15



SLIDE 14





SLIDE 17

SLIDE 16

Degas' wax horses were given titles after he died, just as bronzes of them were cast after his death. Originally, this figure, dated to the 1880s, was called *Horse Clearing an Obstacle*. When the work is examined from different angles both titles are justified, for Degas combined a variety of directional movements that operate to express dynamic action rather than exactitude. The front legs of this horse are positioned as if to jump a hurdle, perhaps in a steeplechase. But its back legs are spread as if bracing to rear up. Compare the wax to *At the Races: Before the Start* (slide 7), a painting in which the horses are supposed to be getting in the lineup, ready to start the race, but either they are angry or annoyed, or their jockey has pulled too hard on their reins. One horse is raised on its hind legs, as is the one in the sculpture. Indeed, in the 1870s and 1880s, Degas' paintings, pastels, and sculpture moved increasingly from a static, labor-intensive manner to a style possessed of movement and fluidity.

S L I D E 16

HORSE BALKING (HORSE CLEARING AN OBSTACLE)
1880s
YELLOW WAX
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon, Upperville, Virginia

S L I D E 17

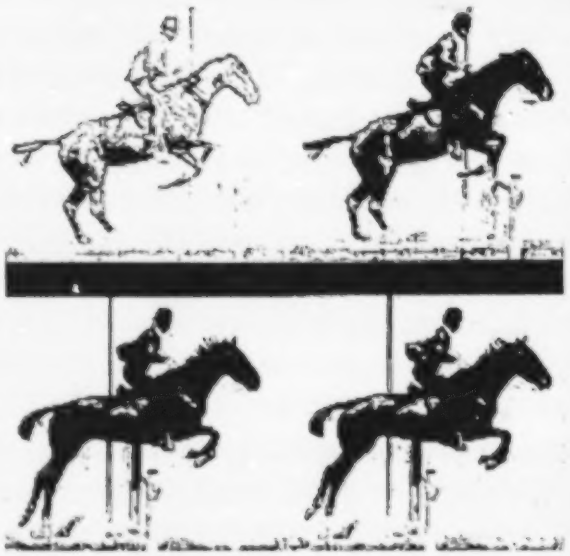
X-RADIOGRAPH IMAGE OF HORSE BALKING (HORSE CLEARING AN OBSTACLE)

X-rays of the interior of *Horse Balking* show that Degas incorporated an unusual, rigid support with a slide that could then be adjusted to raise the chest or the barrel of the horse to the appropriate height. With this armature, Degas increased the range and flexibility with which he worked to synthesize the variety of actions combined in this piece.

SLIDE 18

EADWEARD MUYBRIDGE "DAISY JUMPING A HURDLE, SADDLED, PREPARING FOR THE LEAP" PHOTOGRAPH, PLATE 636 FROM ANIMAL LOCOMOTION 1887

Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.



Horse Balking is dated to about the same time that the first stop-action photographs documenting the actual rather than presumed way that horses move were published in America and Europe. Leland Stanford, governor of California, financed studies of animal and human locomotion by photographer Eadweard Muybridge. Muybridge captured on film the various gaits of horses—such as this one demonstrating a jump. Muybridge's work proved, for example, that when a horse gallops, all four of its legs are raised off the ground in an unusual "tucked-up" position rather than splayed out like a rocking horse, as was previously assumed. The only time a horse's legs extend out in front of the chest and behind the tail is when it is actually jumping a hurdle. The position of the horse's legs in the painting *Scene from the Steeplechase* (slide 3) is, in fact, a proper depiction of a horse crossing a hurdle.

In addition to having jockeys, or models, seated on horses, Muybridge took some of his photographs with a grid behind them. The grid enabled artists to make anatomical calculations and measure exact height locations in order to represent the natural proportions and postures of horses walking, cantering, galloping, and jumping.

Degas may have made *Horse Balking* with its movable sliding armature (slide 17) after having seen a Muybridge photograph or having worked on the sculpture with a photograph or reproduction at hand. In one of his notebooks, Degas had written on the bottom of the page—upside down, as if he had found out about something and had to write himself a note so that he wouldn't forget—the title and date of the magazine, "La Nature," in which the first Muybridge photographs were reproduced in Paris on 14 December 1878. So there is no question that Degas knew of Muybridge's work and was influenced by it.

Although Degas' precise intent with this sculpture may never be known, evidence from visual examination, X-rays, and the Muybridge photographs the artist knew brings us closer to understanding the nuances Degas understood. It makes it easier to picture Degas in his studio working on something, and then reworking it, using various points of reference. Degas was striving to capture something real, but in a modern way—not faithfully reproducing every physical detail as did the *animaliers* of his era, but creating an image that reads the way someone would see or perhaps remember it.

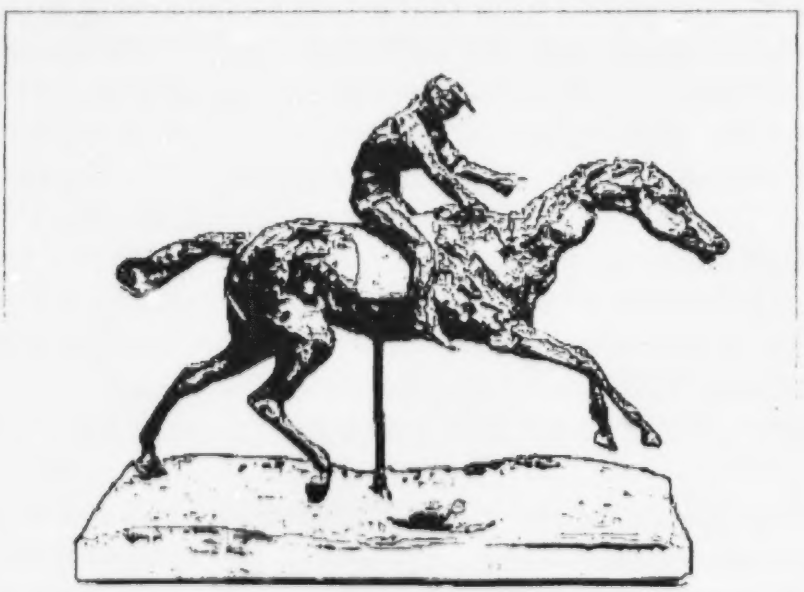
SLIDE 19

HORSE WITH JOCKEY; HORSE GALLOPING ON RIGHT FOOT, THE BACK LEFT ONLY TOUCHING THE GROUND
1890s
BROWN WAX AND CLOTH
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon, Upperville, Virginia

This image leads to the last phase of Degas' depiction of horses in wax and clay. He continued to make sculpture, certainly after the turn of the century, but his late sculpture is almost exclusively of dancers and bathers. *Horse and Jockey* is probably Degas' last surviving horse sculpture, dated to the 1890s.

The work personifies movement, even in its undulated base. The jockey leans forward, in sync with his horse. And the horse has a very carefully formed head, long and extended, to indicate motion. Look closely at the horse's neck. You can actually see the fingerprints where Degas squeezed the wax, and pulled and pushed it out to get a sinuous curve, suggesting action. Little surface finish exists on the piece, which contributes further to the impression of speed. Degas' indication of muscular exertion, particularly in the neck, and of sweat and flying mane—everything projects the essence of a horse in motion in an abstracted, yet very real, way.

All of Degas' sculpture could be called mixed media—wax, clay, cork, bits of paper, pieces of wood, wire—but this one also incorporates different types of fabrics. The jockey's



shirt, his pants, and his cap are actually pieces of cloth that have been carefully applied over the wax figure and then covered with more wax. Fabric depicting either blanket or saddle is a piece of felted or matted material also covered in wax and put on the horse's back. Degas used the fabrics to provide a sense of texture. The materials also differentiate between animal and human, a distinction lacking in the earlier *Horse with Jockey* (slide 14), which may have been experimental or unfinished.

X-rays show that the armature of *Horse and Jockey* is spartan—four legs, a central spine, and a small curve for a neck, but nothing extra added at this point, because Degas no longer needed to experiment with how to make his internal structure.

Above all, this late horse and jockey confirm what has already been stated about Degas: he made his sculpture as works of art. They did not operate as models for his work in other media, but are another aspect of his artistic range.

SLIDE 20

DRESSED BALLET DANCER (PETITE DANSEUSE DE QUATORZE ANS) 1880/1881, CAST C. 1920–1923, PLASTER CAST

National Gallery of Art, Washington, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon

Degas' use of mixed media is epitomized by the only sculpture he ever exhibited: *Dressed Ballet Dancer*, which was in the Sixth Impressionist Exhibition of 1881. Degas was supposed to display the sculpture in the 1880 Paris Salon, the official exhibition of the French arts establishment, but feeling that it wasn't ready, he exhibited only the empty glass case he had made. It was a fascinating way for Degas to build anticipation for his work.

When the *Dancer* was shown the following year, it received mixed reviews. The majority of critics disliked the piece. They thought it was ugly, that it looked like a museum specimen, in part because Degas exhibited it inside a case. Some considered the head and face grotesque, and they compared her to a little monkey. Degas was thought to have called his dancers the "little rats of the opera." But this girl—who was actually a young dance student named

Marie van Goethem—looks like a typical early adolescent, with her protruding belly, flat chest, and practiced ballet pose.

In addition to its forthright portrayal of a youthful body type, Degas' use of mixed media also rocked the art world at the time. Having modeled her in fleshlike tinted wax, Degas gave the *Dancer* a real cloth skirt, a real silk bodice, a wig of real hair with a green ribbon tied around its long braid, and pink ballet slippers. On one of his many drawings of Marie, Degas had written the address of a dollmaker and dressmaker where he probably purchased the hair and the tiny slippers.

To understand public reaction to this work, it helps to be aware of the debate in artistic circles at the end of the nineteenth century concerning polychrome versus monochrome sculpture. People were used to dark bronzes and white marbles. Degas' wax tinting and his addition of other colorful, nontraditional elements such as the dancer's net skirt, hair, and satin bodice and shoes, presented an array of textures and surface finishes that took people by surprise and would later influence the modern sculpture of cubists, surrealists, and later twentieth-century artists. Despite dissenting opinions on Degas' brash young figure, however, there were also critics who praised the *Dancer* as the epitome of authenticity.

The largest and most famous of Degas' wax sculpture, *Dressed Ballet Dancer* was first cast in plaster before it was cast in bronze. The National Gallery is fortunate to have received the plaster as well as a promised gift of the wax. It is believed that plasters were made from the wax in this instance only, possibly because the figure was so large and required a number of mold sections. The plaster was painted faithfully to reproduce the coloration (patina) of the wax, thereby providing the Hébrard Foundry a good record of the sculpture's surface finish to work from when the bronzes were patinated and dressed the same way as the wax sculpture.

Degas' *Dancer* became one of the most beloved works of sculpture in the history of Western art. Like the wax horses, it is a result of the high degree of technical and artistic experimentation that the modernist Degas employed throughout his career. His innovative strategies to capture the essence of attitude, stance, movement, gesture, and consciousness—a realm beyond realism of appearance—lie at the heart of his contribution to art.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Boggs, Jean Sutherland. *Degas.* New York, 1996.

Boggs, Jean Sutherland. *Degas* [exh. cat., Metropolitan Museum of Art] (New York, 1988).

Herbert, Robert L. *Impressionism: Art, Leisure, and Parisian Society.* New Haven, 1988.

Millard, Charles W. *The Sculpture of Edgar Degas.* Princeton, N.J., 1976.

Sturman, Shelley, and Barbour, Daphne. "The Materials of the Sculptor," *Apollo Magazine* (August 1995), 49–54.

Teaching Activities

VISUAL ART AND THE CHALLENGE OF DEPICTING MOVEMENT

Painters and sculptors struggle with the goal of suggesting lifelike movement in both human and animal subjects. Sometimes photography can help artists understand and depict motion. In 1872, Eadweard Muybridge was asked by Leland Stanford, the governor of California, to help settle a bet that at any one time all four hooves of a horse galloping at top speed were off the ground. Through his photographs, Muybridge proved that this was true. This experiment was the catalyst for Muybridge's photographic experiments in motion and movement. Photographs, such as slide 18, helped artists see the precise sequence of movement and pattern of footfalls of the horse.

After Degas learned of Muybridge's photographs and the exact position of a horse's legs in motion, his paintings and sculpture neither continue the stylized flying gallop nor adopt the photographically documented four-leg "tuck." Is this surprising? Do artists have an obligation to reflect science in their art? What is the relationship between science and art?

Activities

1. Construct your own viewfinder. Using a piece of plain cardboard, draw a square with each side five inches long. Measure one inch inside the square to create a smaller square with three-inch-long sides. Cut out the smaller square. You have created a frame or viewfinder. Hold it up and look through the frame. Select a scene—an object or person. Hold the viewfinder so the subject is in the center of your frame. Move your frame to the side so you see only a portion of the subject. How does this change your perception of the image? Can you frame "motion"? Experiment with different scenes. Draw what you see through your frame, using pastel, chalk, pencil, marker, or whatever medium you have available.

2. Try drawing a picture using a single line. Once your pencil touches the paper, begin to draw and do not pick up the pencil until you have completed the picture. Start with simple objects like a circle, or a star. Then try a fish and more difficult images. Try this exercise to suggest images in motion. Do you need to add anything to your image to create more movement?

3. A "flip book" is a small book with sequential images that suggest movement. When the pages are flipped very quickly, the image appears to move. You can create your own flip book of a person, an animal running, or a ball bouncing. Decide on a subject and think of a beginning, middle, and end to the action. You will need a pad of stiff paper (about four by six inches) with at least twenty-five sheets. Each drawing must be slightly different from the previous one and show a sequence. A variation on this activity would be to take a series of sequential photographs, cut them apart into individual frames, and then reassemble them into a flip book.

THE HORSE IN ART, ADVERTISING, AND JOURNALISM

1. Assemble various reproductions of paintings by different artists that depict horses. Some artists to research are George Stubbs and Rosa Bonheur. How are the images of the horses similar? Different? Can some of the images be classified as horse "portraits"? Why? Why not? If other horse images are not an exact likenesses of a specific animal, what might the artist's objective have been in painting or sculpting the horse?

2. Collect a variety of advertisements, or compile a list of commercial products that rely upon the horse for marketing strategy. Have groups present their research. They may consider what kind of lifestyle or image the horse is intended to promote or "sell." In what ways have cars and sports-utility vehicles been associated with horses? Why?

3. Design your own advertisement using a horse. What is the product you are trying to promote? Fitness? A vacation spot? A beauty product?

4. Degas' images often suggest a story. Based on what you see in *Scene from the Steeplechase,* write a news article "covering" the event. Be sure to include in your first two paragraphs these five basic journalistic points: who, what, why, where, and how. Include details about the jockey's past riding record, about the horse's history, and the jockey's condition after the fall.

ARTISTS AND THE DEPICTION OF CONTEMPORARY LIFE

Degas' fascination with the racehorse and scenes of the racetrack reflected a larger interest in the entertainments and leisure pursuits of middle- and upper-class Parisians. Degas shared with the impressionist artists a belief that by painting scenes of everyday activities and amusements, he was expressing the "modernity" of his era.

1. Assume a role similar to Degas' and imagine yourself as a chronicler of your own day and age. What contemporary scene would you choose as emblematic of the present day? In particular, what sporting event might be a fitting modern-day counterpart to Degas' racetrack pictures?

2. In his depictions of the ballet and the races, Degas rarely showed his dancers performing or his horses racing. In your role as chronicler of the present day, consider your viewpoint. What moment of the activity would you capture? Before the event, during, or after? How are the moods of the athletes different at these times? Is there tension, agitation, excitement, or relief? When you sketch, paint, or sculpt your choice of a modern-day sporting event, think about the composition and colors that convey a sense of movement and vitality.

Vocabulary

Find definitions for the following words.

Example:
animalier = French term for artist who specializes in depicting animals

anatomy	gesture	Paris salons
armature	girth	pastel
bridle	impressionism	saddle
composition	jockey	steeplechase
frieze	mane	stirrup
gait	monoprint	thoroughbred

Program texts have been derived from commentary by Kimberly Jones (Part I) and Shelley Sturman (Part II).

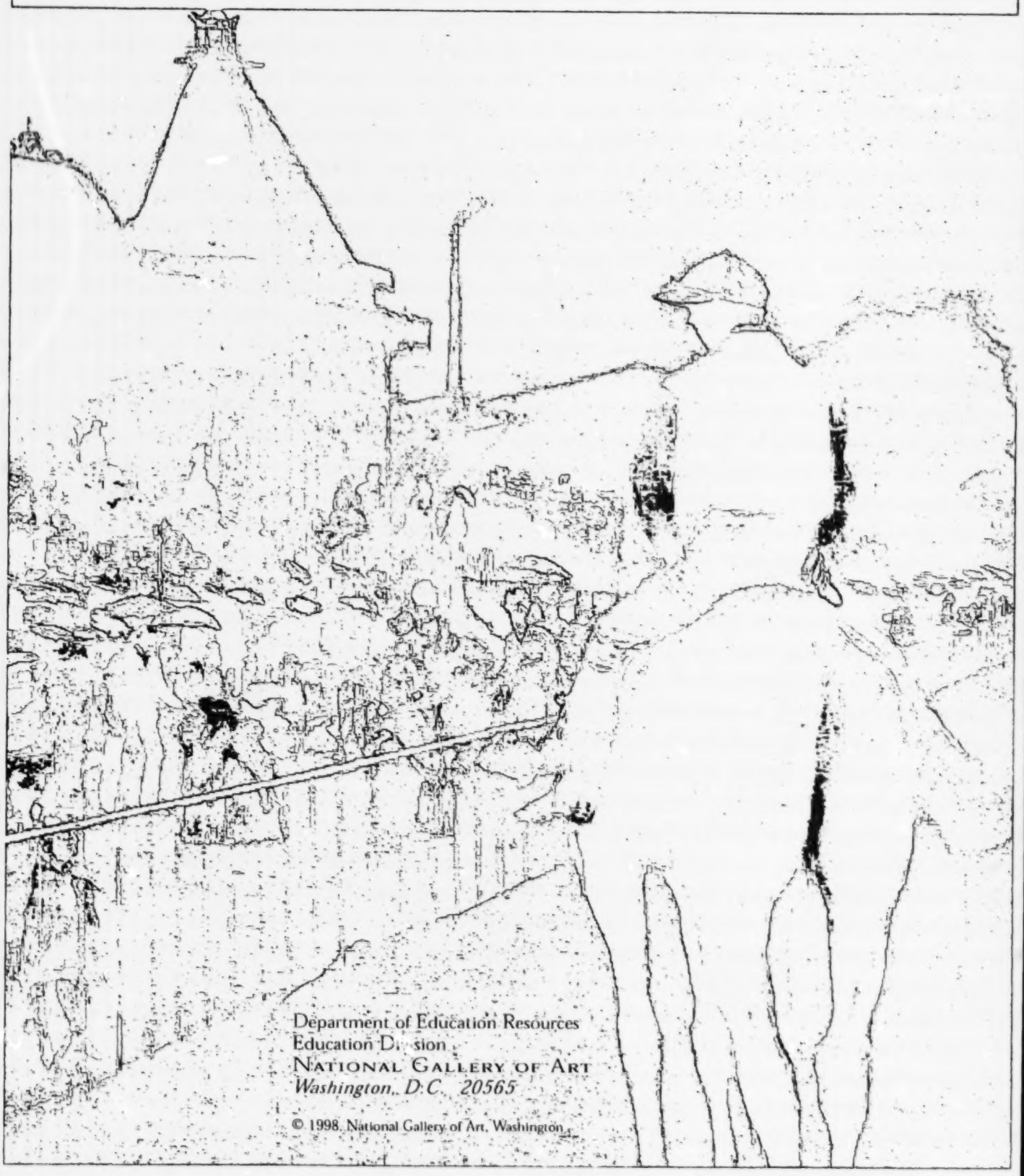
KIMBERLY JONES is assistant curator of French paintings at the National Gallery of Art. She has been a fellow at the Musée d'Orsay, Paris, and the Musée national du Château de Pau, and is currently at work on the National Gallery *Systematic Catalogue of French Paintings,* a compendium of scholarly research and information. She has a B.A. from Western Maryland College, where she was elected to Phi Beta Kappa, and has received an M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Maryland.

SHELLEY STURMAN is head of object conservation at the National Gallery of Art. She has worked in the conservation departments at the Walters Art Gallery and Freer Gallery of Art, after receiving her B.A. and M.A. from Brandeis University and her M.S. from the Winterthur Museum University of Delaware Program in art conservation. She has published extensively, contributing to the Gallery's *Systematic Catalogue of Western Decorative Arts* and *Studies in Conservation,* as well as to such journals as *Apollo.* She has been investigating Degas' sculpture for the past ten years.

This program was produced by RUTH R. PERLIN, head, department of education resources, and BARBARA S. MOORE, head, education publications, education division, National Gallery of Art.

Discussion questions and activities were created by the staff of the departments of teacher and school programs, education publications, and education resources.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE



Department of Education Resources
Education Division
NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART
Washington, D.C. 20565

© 1998, National Gallery of Art, Washington

U.S. Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)
National Library of Education (NLE)
Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)

NOTICE

Reproduction Basis

	This document is covered by a signed "Reproduction Release (Blanket)" form (on file within the ERIC system), encompassing all or classes of documents from its source organization and, therefore, does not require a "Specific Document" Release form.
X	This document is Federally-funded, or carries its own permission to reproduce, or is otherwise in the public domain and, therefore, may be reproduced by ERIC without a signed Reproduction Release form (either "Specific Document" or "Blanket").